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AUTHOR Evans, Charles S.; Weible, Tom
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ABSTRACT

Parents of fifth and sixth grade pupils from a suburban St. Louis (Missouri) community were surveyed to ascertain their perceptions concerning the importance of elementary social studies and how it should be taught. More specifically, the investigation determined if parents' perceptions were consistent with the revised National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Curriculum Guidelines, since these represent what authorities in the field deem essential for an effective social studies program. The survey was distributed to 767 parents, with 215 responding. Survey items were extracted from the first seven major guideline areas of the NCSS guidelines. Parents overwhelmingly agreed that social studies is an important part of the elementary curriculum, and their perceptions are more consistent with the Revised NCSS Curriculum Guidelines than with what is occurring in the field. The findings suggest that perhaps schools should reconsider exaggerated commitments to a curriculum based on the 3 R's and focus attention on developing a well-rounded curriculum that will prepare students to deal with the issues of the 21st century. (Survey results are reported in a table by percentages which includes tabulated results from a pilot study conducted with parents in a rural midwestern community.) (RM)

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# "Parents Expect More Than The Three R's in The Elementary Grades"

Charles S. Evans
Assistant Professor of Education
William Woods College

Tom Weible
Associate Professor of Social Studies
University of Missouri-Columbia

SO 014 406

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Boston, MA, November, 19??).

"Parents Expect More Than The Three R's in The Elementary Grades"

The momentum of the "back to basics" movement has brought increased pressure to teach the three R's, resulting in an emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics at the expense of other content areas. A recent IRT study reported that reading and language arts comprised from 38 to 43 percent of the elementary school day; mathematics took 12 to 24 percent; and from 6 to 21 percent of the instructional time was devoted to art, music and physical education. Observations revealed that little or no time was given to social studies or science.[1]

Much to the dismay of social studies educators, the literature which indicates social studies is being neglected in the elementary grades continues to mount. This is especially distressing when we consider that a key expectation of the schools is to educate citizens who are capable of perpetuating our democratic ideals. As we examine the events and issues facing our nation now, and into the future, it would be foolhardy to ignore the task of preparing students to be capable decision makers in matters of local, national or global concern. Nuclear warfare, overpopulation, world hunger, dwindling resources and the rise of terrorism are but a few of the problems which threaten the existence of humankind.

The increasing awareness and complexity of the human condition make it hard to believe that educators would consider the social studies a peripheral area of the elementary curriculum. Likewise, it seems difficult to believe that parents want their children to attend schools that are void of those subjects which help promote

a better understanding of the nature of human beings and their relationships with their social and physical environments. If understanding human beings and their interactions is critical to the survival of our planet, we must reflect upon the following statement by Combs: "to meet our responsibility in preparing youth for the future, curriculum planning must concentrate far more attention on the human condition than is currently the case."[2]

With above notions as a basis the authors conducted a survey to ascertain parents' perceptions concerning the importance of elementary social studies and how it should be taught. More specifically, the purpose of the investigation was to determine if parents' perceptions were consistent with the Revised NCSS Curriculum Guidelines[3] since these represent what authorities in the field deem essential for an effective social studies program. Participants in this study were parents of 5th and 6th grade pupils from a suburban St. Louis community. The community is characterized as relatively stable and conservative in nature with a socio-economic composition ranging from lower to upper income groups. Schools are integrated with a minority population of approximately 19 percent.

The survey was distributed to 767 parents, with 215 responding. Participation was voluntary. Restrictions placed upon researchers made it impossible to do a follow-up of non-respondents. Items in the survey were extracted from the first seven major guideline areas of the NCSS Revised Curriculum Guidelines. The items were rewritten to eliminate terminology which might be unfamiliar or confusing to lay people. To reduce response bias, items were both positively and negatively directed.[4] For reporting purposes, however, all statements are expressed in a positive direction.

Results of the survey are reported by percentages in Table 1. Percentages are based upon the total number of participants who responded to each statement. For purposes of comparison, results from a pilot study conducted with parents in a rural midwestern community are reported in parenthesis next to the responses of suburban participants. When interpreting the results of the survey, the reader must keep in mind the limitations which may result from the use of a volunteer sample.[5]

(Insert Table 1)

## Discussion

Responses from parents participating in this survey should be encouraging to social studies educators. Parents overwhelmingly agreed that social studies is an important part of the elementary curriculum, leading us to believe that they expect more than the 3 R's. Perhaps even more significant is the consistency of parent perceptions supporting the Revised NCSS Curriculum Guidelines.

While this survey represents a beginning in our efforts to determine parent viewpoints about social studies, the results indicate that these respondents would agree that a social studies program should meet the individual needs of their children and actively involve them in the learning process. Parents indicate agreement for the use of a wide variety of resources and teaching strategies designed to provide opportunities for studies in acquiring information and making decisions. Yet, studies continue to document that social studies in dominated by the use of a single text in which the learner is placed in a passive role.[6]

Results of this survey indicate that parents consider social studies an important subject, and their perceptions are more consistent with the Revised NCSS Curriculum Guidelines than with what is occurring in the field. Could it be that schools have misinterpreted public expectations of a "back to basics" curriculum? Perhaps schools should reconsider exaggerated commitments to a curriculum based upon the 3 R's and focus attention on developing a well-rounded curriculum that will prepare students to deal with the issues of the 21st century.

TABLE 1 PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF NCSS GUIDELINES

| | %Strongly Agree | % Agree | %Don't Know | % Disagree | %Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| It is necessary to involve students in selecting goals for their school's social studies program. | 10 (13) | 41 (50) | 8 (6) | 33 (27) | 8 (4) |
| Students should have some choice in selecting learning activities in the social studies class. | 13 (10) | 67 (73) | 6 (4) | 14 (13) | 0 (0) |
| The social studies program should be designed to meet the needs and concerns of all the students. | 29 (32) | 60 (58) | 3 (2) | 7 (6) | 1 (2) |
| Social studies should be an important part of the K-6 curriculum. | 39 (29) | 52 (54) | 5 (7) | 4 (6) | 0 (4) |
| Students should have an opportunity to study and discuss values, which may be different from their own in social studies. | 37 (26) | 54 (60) | 4 (6) | 5 (2) | 0 (6) |
| An analysis of controversial global problems (racism, sexism, world resources, nuclear proliferation, and ecological imbalance) should be included in the social studies program. | 31 (23) | 49 (43) | 5 (4) | 14 (24) | 1 (6) |
| Local issues should be included as a topic of study in the social studies program. | 39 (17) | 52 (73) | 6 (8) | 2 (2) | 1 (0) |
| The social studies program should promote actual student involvement in local issues. | 21 (19) | 50 (60) | 11 (13) | 13 (4) | 5 (4) |
| An understanding of the past should be an important aspect of the social studies program. | 40 (27) | 52 (65) | 6 (2) | 2 (2) | 0 (4) |

( ) Rural Parents' Perceptions

TABLE 1

| | %Strongly Agree | % Agree | %Don't Know | % Disagree | %Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A balance of local, state, national, and international topics should be included in the social studies program. | 30 (19) | 60 (71) | 6 (6) | 4 (4) | 0 (0) |
| The social studies program should provide the opportunity for students to examine potential future conditions and problems at the local, state, national and international levels. | 30 (13) | 57 (79) | 7 (4) | 5 (4) | 1 (0) |
| Human achievement and failure should be included in the social studies program. | 19 (21) | 67 (66) | 8 (9) | 4 (4) | 2 (0) |
| The school's social studies program should be continuously evaluated to keep pace with the ever changing world. | 41 (31) | 53 (67) | 4 (2) | 1 (0) | 1 (0) |
| Learning activities should be sufficiently varied and flexible to appeal to many kinds of students. | 36 (24) | 54 (72) | 2 (4) | 6 (0) | 2 (0) |
| Student's ideas, feelings, and opinions should be respected in all social studies activities. | 39 (40) | 53 (46) | 4 (6) | 4 (8) | 0 (0) |
| Activities should encourage students to investigate and seek additional information, on their own, about the topics they are studying in social studies. | 49 (28) | 49 (70) | 1 (2) | 0 (0) | 1 (0) |
| Many reading resources (literature, newspapers, magazines, and maps) are required for social studies, no one textbook is sufficient. | 45 (23) | 49 (65) | 2 (4) | 3 (4) | 1 (4) |
| Reading resources should accommodate a wide range of reading abilities and interests. | 39 (27) | 56 (69) | 2 (4) | 3 (0) | 0 (0) |

( ) Rural Parents' Perceptions

TABLE 1

| | %Strongly Agree | % Agree | %Don't Know | % Disagree | %Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Films, field trips, filmstrips, and guest speakers are necessary resources for a good social studies program. | 32 (38) | 44 (28) | 8 (6) | 13 (26) | 3 (2) |
| Social studies activities should require students to work in small and large group situations. | 16 (13) | 62 (67) | 16 (10) | 5 (10) | 1 (0) |
| Social studies should provide students with skills necessary to learn about their world--independent of classroom instruction. | 37 (25) | 57 (65) | 4 (2) | 1 (8) | 0 (0) |

( ) Rural Parents' Perceptions

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